

Starting a Social Justice Group



Produced By



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*What does the Lord require of you
But to do justice, and to love kindness
And to walk humbly with your God?*

Micah 6:8

Why start a social justice group in your congregation?

Day by day we are battered by stories of injustice in our society. People are homeless or unemployed. There are arguments about how schools should be funded. We watch as land is denuded, rivers fail, or rubbish piles up. In some parts of the world, there is war, hunger, and violence.

We long for a nation where Indigenous people and later arrivals can live with respect for one another. We long for a nation where everyone has access to education and employment. We love the beauty of this land, and want to protect it. We want a world without violence and exploitation.

Can we make a difference?

There is no instant cure. But God is always at work in this world, among humankind, seeking justice, peace and the restoration of creation. We can work with God to make a difference. To do so, we need to be prepared to undertake a journey.

In working for social justice, it is important to work as a group. Justice is about the common good. The first expression of this is working as a group. Groups are also important because they provide a place for nurturing and sustaining one another.

What makes a group effective?

Creative and effective groups happen when people

- listen to and learn from one another,
- work cooperatively rather than competitively,
- take responsibility for group meetings functioning well,
- take responsibility for getting things done.
- have someone who keeps notes of decisions

- ensure that all decisions include who will take responsibility for action, and deadlines for getting things done.

How do we start an effective group?

Step 1 – Prayer

Committing our world to God. Remembering that God is already at work in the world, healing and transforming it. Moving beyond raw emotion and finding our own calm centre. This is not only the first step, but an ongoing element of the journey. (See also the *Supporting Social Justice Through Prayer* brochure available from UnitingCare NSW.ACT)

Step 2 - Finding allies

Who else in the congregation feels this way? Are there people in my street or my local community who share my concerns? This may be the point at which to seek the support of the Church Council. Ask for their support in calling a meeting of interested people. Put a notice in the congregation notice sheet and on the noticeboard. Make sure they know who to contact for more details, and the date, time, place and purpose of the meeting.

Step 3 - Getting organised

Forming a group. At the initial meeting, find out who people are, and what their interests are. Get names and contact details, and permission to share this information list with one another. You will need to work out a place to meet regularly and a regular time that suits people. You will need to find out what people are interested in doing. Do people want to focus on one issue, and to achieve something specific in a limited time – a short term goal? Or do they want to take on a long term commitment to justice? How often are they able to meet? What do people want from the group and what are they willing to contribute to it?

Step 4 – Becoming more focused

How are we going to start? Will we respond to a particular document, such as the annual kit for Social Justice Sunday, Simply Sharing Week or Reconciliation Week? Or do we want to deal with a specific issue that confronts us in our local community, or in the media, like poverty, or homelessness, or environmental degradation? Or is there a particular event we want to respond to, such as a Reconciliation ceremony, or a state or federal election? Or are we a group of people who are already working on various issues, who simply need to be a support group for one another? The following steps suggest ways of working on a particular issue. They may take several meetings, and action in between.

Step 5 - Finding resources

Are there church educational resources or position papers that would be helpful? What have UnitingCare NSW.ACT, UnitingCare Burnside (see especially their broadsheet *Children Matter*) or National Social Responsibility and Justice said about this issue? What have other churches, or the National Council of Churches published? Are there community organisations that have useful information? Which library or bookshop might carry useful resources?

Step 6 - Becoming informed

Use the resources to begin studying the issue. What is the real problem behind the symptoms that we can see? Who are the people involved? What is really going on? How do the poorest or most disadvantaged people in the situation describe it? What do they want done? How do we understand this issue in the light of the Christian faith? Does this issue require us to ask new faith questions and look at the Christian tradition in a new way? (UnitingCare NSW.ACT provides some examples of how to go about this, on its website and in print.)

Step 7- Planning action

What are we able to do? What are the steps we need to take towards our goal? What resources are available?

- (a) Within the congregation. Should we write something for the church bulletin, or liaise with church council about holding a seminar to educate the congregation about the issue, perhaps with a guest speaker or video? Can we contribute to the prayers of intercession on Sunday? Should we organise a Sunday service around this issue? Who do we need to liaise with about this (Church council? Minister?)
Resources: parishes and ministers regularly receive liturgical material with social justice themes for various occasions.
- (b) Within the wider church. Do we think the wider church should be saying something about this? Is it already doing so? (Ring up or check websites for UnitingCare NSW.ACT, Burnside, National Social Responsibility and Justice, and UnitingCare Australia). Have recent synods or assemblies said something about the issue? Have there been media releases (check synod and assembly websites and communications units)? If not, we might want to talk to someone in the relevant agency about whether they are doing some work now about the issue. Or we might want to take a proposal of our own to synod, via church council and presbytery? When we have done the basic research and reflection, it may be useful to get some advice, eg from UnitingCare about how best to formulate the proposal and the rationale.
- (c) In the wider community. Do we want to write a letter to someone, and ask other members of the congregation to join us in signing it? Do we want to meet with politicians, or hold a public meeting, a demonstration or a prayer vigil? Should we join a landcare group or start a new community service or facility? Can we

become part of a larger campaign – eg join Force Ten, participate in the FairWear Campaign, start an Amnesty International Group?

Resources: Many organisations offer newsletters and magazines as ways of being informed for action. Burnside's *Venturing out* provides a guide to developing a community service or facility.

Step 8 - Reflection

Even if you have not completed all the other steps, you should reflect on progress from time to time. Did we do what we set out to do? What have we achieved? What have we learned? What new questions do we have that we need to explore before taking further action?

Step 9 – Continuing prayer, study, action and reflection

The above steps include examples to stimulate your own thinking. Your group will need to come up with its own way of doing things. Sometimes some steps will need to happen at the same time. For example, you may want to liaise with the Church Council early in the process, but not seek formal recognition until you have had a meeting or two to work out exactly what the group wants to do.

Step 10 Celebrate each step you achieve, and remind yourself of your vision



Useful Websites and phone numbers

UnitingCare NSW.ACT Ph: (02) 8267-4276
<http://nsw.uca.org.au/bsr>

UnitingCare Burnside Ph (02) 9678-6866
<http://burnside.org.au/>

Social Responsibility and Justice Ph (02) 8267-4200
<http://nat.uca.org.au/NSRJWeb.html>

UnitingCare Australia Ph (02) 6290-2160
<http://unitingcare.org.au/>

NSW Synod Ph (02) 8267-4300
<http://nsw.uca.org.au>

NSW Synod Communications Unit Ph (02) 8267-4307
<http://nsw.uca.org.au/cu/>

FairWear Ph (02) 9380-9091
<http://www.awatw.org.au/fairwear/index.html>

Amnesty Ph 1300 300 920
<http://www.amnesty.org.au/>